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ABSTRACT

Educational access and retention issues for low-wage working parents were examined in a study conducted at six community colleges nationwide. Three focus groups were held at each community college--one each for current community college students, those who had enrolled, in but not completed a community college program, and those who had never attended credit-granting community college programs. Together, the 18 focus groups included 131 participants. The focus group participants also completed short demographic surveys and follow-up telephone interviews. As a group, the current students reported fewer personal barriers to community college

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attendance, significant support from family, and more stability in terms of income and housing. The former students reported a mixed set of supports and stability that was influenced by periodic ebbs and flows. Overall, the potential students reported many ongoing barriers, few family supports, and lives in a constant state of flux regarding factors such as income, employment, and housing. The following models and program strategies were recommended to community colleges wishing to increase access and retention for low-wage workers: (1) student support centers; (2) short-term certification programs; (3) supported distance learning; (4) on-campus child care; (5) financial aid for working adults; and (6) enforcement of nondiscrimination in higher education. (Contains 16 references.) (MN)

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Abstract

Based on qualitative data from focus groups conducted at six community colleges nationwide, this paper examines educational access and retention issues for low-wage working parents. The paper reports early impressions from three different groups of low-wage working parents: those who are current community college students, those who had dropped out or stopped out of community college programs, and those who had never attended credit-granting community college programs. Some of the factors that have acted as barriers or supports for low-wage working parents include: institutional issues at the colleges themselves (e.g. counseling, financial aid, and special programs), issues with organizations external to the college such as employers and government agencies (e.g. TANF work requirements, employer tuition reimbursement programs, and conflicts between college and work schedules), and personal factors in the lives of the low-wage workers themselves (e.g. access to child care, domestic violence, and personal motivation). These findings provide a compass for suggesting potential program models and ideas for future MDRC research.

I. Introduction

A major public policy challenge is how to increase the career mobility and wage progression opportunities for low-wage workers, many of whom are former welfare recipients. Community colleges have the potential to be an important part of the solution: receiving an associate's degree, vocational certificate, or short-term training credential is associated with higher earnings. Yet many low-wage working students do not capitalize on the opportunities offered by community colleges. They either do not apply or a high proportion of those who do apply and enroll, drop out.

This paper presents impressions from Opening Doors to Earning Credentials, a qualitative study that examines access and retention issues for low-wage working parents. First, we examine the policy context by discussing the relationship between education and earnings as it relates to low-wage workers. We also explain our focus on community colleges and how they are well-suited to design pathways that lead low-wage working people toward higher education and career-track employment. Second, based on data from six community colleges nationwide, we present themes regarding educational access and retention from the perspectives of three groups of low-wage workers: those who are current community college students, those who had dropped out or stopped out of community college programs, and those who had never attended credit-granting community college programs. Finally, we suggest potential program models and ideas for future research that might address some of the issues raised by the research findings.

A. The Relationship Between Education and Earnings: The Importance of Community Colleges

In the post-welfare reform era, with its strong emphasis on employment, many current and former welfare recipients are joining the ranks of low-wage workers. As an important subset of the low-wage working population, current and former recipients have been the focus of considerable research which helps shed some light on the employment patterns of low-wage workers, and the relationship between education and training and earnings. MDRC's previous research suggests that, with the exception of studies of financial incentives, most welfare-to-work programs produced modest gains in employment and earnings but earning increases are not large enough to get families out of poverty (Bloom and Michalopoulos, 2001; Gueron and Pauly, 1991). The evidence from welfare leaver studies indicates that those who are working are usually in low-wage jobs, that are often part-time and with few benefits. Research on welfare recipients who have left public assistance for low-wage work suggests that, as a group, employment is often intermittent, at nontraditional hours (evening, weekends), and without a fixed schedule (Strawn and Martinson, 2000). In addition, working welfare recipients receive little or no increase in income or promotional opportunities, with their welfare benefits merely replaced by low wages (Strawn and Martinson, 2000). This is especially true for blacks and Hispanics who, as a group, earn less than their white counterparts and have fewer employment opportunities (Gooden, 1998, 1999; Holzer and Stoll, 2000). A major challenge in the next generation of income security strategies is how to increase the career mobility and wage progression opportunities for low-wage workers, which includes former welfare recipients.

Postsecondary education and training is one likely strategy to increase career advancement opportunities for low-wage workers. There is compelling correlation evidence that increased years of schooling and educational credentials are associated with higher earnings (Grubb, 1999; Kane and Rouse, 1995). Students who complete an associate's degree or certificate program earn more than those with a high school diploma or GED, and those with a bachelor's degree earn more than those with a two-year degree or certificate. Thus helping low-wage working families earn more advanced academic and technical credentials seems to be an important public policy goal to raise family income, reduce poverty, and increase the quality of the workforce, especially in areas with skill shortages. Returning to welfare research, the education factor as it relates to welfare recipients is complex. MDRC research on pre-employment programs for welfare recipients found that remedial and adult basic education programs have not been particularly effective in increasing employment and earnings when compared to job search and other labor force attachment strategies, or strategies that combine labor force attachment with education, even for those lacking a high school diploma or GED (Hamilton et al., 1997). Explanations for this include that most welfare recipients reported preferring work to school; most who went to education programs did not stay long enough to benefit; and the majority went to basic education or short-term training rather than college degree or certificate programs (Hamilton and Brock, 1994).

A few studies examined the benefits of college education to welfare recipients and barriers to degree completion, from the perspective of students. One study surveyed college graduates in five different states prior to the passage of welfare reform about the employment, earnings, and qualitative benefits of their college educations. The respondents overwhelmingly reported positive changes in terms of employment, earnings, public assistance receipt, further education, self-esteem and parenting (Gittell, Gross and Holdaway, 1998). This study identified several self-reported barriers that graduates overcame, including being first-generation college students, overwhelming admissions and financial aid processes at the institutional level, resistance from welfare caseworkers, poor academic and career counseling at the college, and college programs that were unresponsive to the local labor market (Gittell, Gross and Holdaway, 1998).

Community colleges are a key provider to address low-wage workers' education and training needs. They have a long history of providing the greatest access to postsecondary education to disadvantaged groups in America, as compared to other education and training institutions. With their open door policy, low tuition, locations often close to low-income communities, and flexible course schedules, community colleges are the primary point of entry to higher education for low-wage working adults (Dougherty, 1994). Greenberg, Strawn and Plimpton (2000) reviewed economic research that indicates a clear payoff from earning community college credentials, with even higher returns from further postsecondary education. One study cited, for example, found 18% better earnings for men who completed associate's degree programs, and 23% better earnings for women, compared to those with only high school diplomas (Kane and Rouse, 1995). Further, community colleges possess many of the elements of successful education and training programs: the ability to adapt to local labor market needs; a full range of education and training options including remedial, vocational, and academic programs; support services for a wide range of students; and opportunities for lifelong learning with

articulation between two-year associate's degrees and transfer to four-year college programs (Grubb, 2001).

Despite these advantages, many low-wage workers do not enroll in community college, and among those that do, many do not complete their programs. Student retention is a large problem for all community college students, not just low-wage workers. Less than half of students enrolled in public two-year colleges completed a degree within three years of starting (Tinto, 1993). Likewise, Dougherty (1994) cites National Center for Education Statistics studies which demonstrate that more than 40% of community college students leave before attaining a degree. Not all community college drop-outs can be considered institutional failures, however. There are a number of positive reasons that community college students leave, which are difficult to isolate when studying completion rates. These reasons include transfer to four-year colleges before completing a certificate or degree, "experimenting" to find a career path, and building skills for job advancement (Grubb, 2001).

II. Purpose of the Opening Doors Study

The Opening Doors study will enhance this body of research by examining three different groups of low-income individuals: current, former and potential low-wage working community college students. The study takes on added relevance given the recent economic downturn. The Opening Doors study began in the context of a robust economy. However, as unemployment levels rise and low-wage workers become an increasingly vulnerable segment of the labor force, there will likely be an increase in the numbers of unemployed low-income students seeking postsecondary credentials. While issues of employment retention may take precedence over those of career advancement in the coming months, the issues connected with college access and retention remain important.

More specifically, the Opening Doors study seeks to answer a series of related questions regarding how community colleges recruit and retain low-wage working students. These questions include:

1. How knowledgeable are low-wage workers of the opportunities afforded by post-secondary programs?

2. What are the reasons low-wage workers do not apply for postsecondary programs and if they do apply, what factors account for their low completion rates?

3. For these students who are succeeding, what are the factors that account for their success?

4. What state and local policy changes could increase enrollment and completion rates?

5. What can colleges and employers do to make training, certificate and degree programs more accessible?

6. What can colleges and their public system partners do to provide the academic and personal support necessary for higher successful completion rates?

III. Methodology

A. Site Selection

A total of six community colleges were selected for study inclusion based on their demonstrated commitment and capacity to make college offerings more accessible to low-wage working students. Other criteria for inclusion were: geographic cross-section; diversity of student body; type of programming offered (some colleges offer special targeted short-term customized training programs, while others serve disadvantaged students through mainstream degree programs with additional support services); and on-site support services available. The selected community colleges were:

- **Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, California.** The college's Fast Track to Work program offers support services, academic counseling, assistance with financial aid, and career development and life skills training to low-income students enrolled in the college's mainstream degree and certificate programs. All these services are offered in one convenient location on campus. Furthermore, for students receiving public assistance, the Fast Track office hosts two county eligibility workers to address students' welfare-related issues, and a college counselor to help these students access special child care subsidies and work study opportunities.

- **LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, New York.** LaGuardia serves large numbers of low-wage workers from the New York City area. The college offers several education and training options for current welfare recipients, including a "school within a school" program, which provides targeted support services and employment assistance. The school also offers on-site child care, night programs, and cooperative education internships.

- **Macomb Community College in Clinton Township, Michigan.** Macomb, located in a Detroit suburb, has partnered with the local workforce development board to offer a short-term training program, the 16-week Machinist Training Institute, for credit. The program targets low-wage workers and other low-income populations. The college offers additional short-term training programs in areas such as information technology.

- **Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon.** Portland is a leading college in terms of retention efforts. The college schedules programs on weekends for working families, invites the entire family with separate educational programming for parents and children, and offers a wide range of incentives. Portland has recently created career pathway programs which include employer partnerships and articulated future education opportunities at the college or other local higher education institutions. The

college is also piloting case management services for students receiving Perkins vocational education funds.

- **Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio.** Sinclair was the only community college selected as a "best practices" institution for the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's study of "Adult Learning Focused Institutions" (Flint et al., 1999). The college offers many flexible scheduling options including modularized courses and short-term training programs for credit towards longer-term degree or certificate programs. Sinclair is also piloting a new initiative aimed at career advancement for low-wage workers: "Access to Better Jobs." The program provides short-term occupational training, financial assistance to cover tuition and books, support services, and employment assistance to unemployed or underemployed individuals up to 200% of federal poverty level.

- **Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida.** The college offers a special package of support services to students who are educationally and economically disadvantaged, and are either first generation college students or have a diagnosed physical or learning disability, through the Academics in Motion (AIM) program. Services include mentoring, advising, career exploration, peer support, tutoring, workshops and cultural activities. Students at Valencia also have the option to take a semester-long "Student Success" course, and the college conducts targeted outreach with students from their first initial admissions inquiry as part of the advising process.

B. Recruiting Focus Group Participants

At each research site, we conducted focus groups with three groups of low-wage workers. These three groups included individuals who were: 1) enrolled in community college and close to completing their course of study; 2) former students who were no longer enrolled in community college (these students discontinued their studies prior to program completion) and, 3) potential students who are otherwise eligible for community college but who have not enrolled in postsecondary credit-granting programs. Our target focus group size was 6-8, although we accepted up to 10 people per group to allow for cancellations and no shows.

For purposes of this study, the term "low-wage workers" is defined as:

- Age 21 or older;
- Responsible for one or more children 18 years or younger;
- Worked within the past 6 months;[1]
- Earned hourly wages at or below a maximum wage which differed at each site (these wage levels were established in cooperation with college and public agency staff in

[1]We did not distinguish between full-time, part-time, or even sporadic work; some participants were currently unemployed. In addition, exceptions were made to the six-month rule for one focus group that included seasonal workers, who had been unemployed for longer periods of time.

each site, to take into account the local economy and standard of living). These wages ranged from $9 in Dayton, OH to $15/hr in Santa Cruz, CA and Long Island City, NY.[2]

For current students, we asked each college to generate a list of students who had completed 50% or more of their credit-granting certificate or degree programs. In most cases, colleges provided us with lists of students who had completed 25 or more credits, which would represent almost enough credits to earn a certificate (usually 30), and just under half of the credits required to earn an AA or AS degree (usually 60).[3] Students also had to be enrolled for the current semester (or following semester, if the focus groups were conducted between semesters). Several participants were recent graduates, who had just completed their degree requirements within several weeks of the focus group.

Former students were required to have stopped attending the college at least nine months prior to the focus group, and had never completed a degree or certificate program either before or after leaving the college.[4] Many of the former students identified themselves as taking time off from college, while others identified themselves as having dropped out.

Potential students were required to have never attended a credit-granting program or class at a community college or other postsecondary institution. Other types of education and training were permissible, from the college or other institutions, including: non-credit vocational training, adult basic education, GED classes, welfare-to-work programs, job search, continuing education or other non-credit courses.[5]

In many ways, we viewed the three different groups as a continuum rather than distinct, since current students might later withdraw from college due to a change in employment, child care availability or other personal factors, former students may decide to return to college, or potential students may enroll in college once their personal or employment situations have stabilized. Still, comparing across the three groups may provide useful insights to understanding differences and commonalities within the low-wage working parent population.

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[2]The wage levels were as follows across the sites: $15/hr for Cabrillo; $15/hr for LaGuardia; $10/hr for Macomb; $9.50/hr for Portland; $9/hr for Sinclair; and $10/hr for Valencia. We did not take family income into account - only the individual participant's wage level - so in some cases, participants' spouses or partners might earn higher wages than our criteria.

[3]Exceptions include Portland Community College where we were provided with a list of students receiving Perkins vocational education grants; in order to receive these grants, students had to have completed 50% or more of their occupational/technical programs. As a result, Portland current students were likely to be enrolled in occupational/technical programs, except for those recruited via flyers. Also, students recruited via other methods outside of college generated mailing lists may not have completed 50% or more of their programs.

[4]Exceptions included 2 participants across 2 sites who had attended colleges other than those affiliated with the study, and a third participant who had left the local college without completing his program, but already had several terminal degrees, including a MA degree. There was one other exception where a participant had completed a certificate program, but withdrew while working towards an associate's degree. In one case, the participant had been screened but was accepted by mistake; in the other two cases, participants had not been screened but showed up for the focus groups and the team decided to allow them to remain given that they fit the study criteria otherwise.

[5]One participant, for example, did have a certificate from a non-credit training program in another state as a Certified Nursing Assistant.

The research team worked with each of the college sites, and in most cases, their public agency partners (e.g. workforce development boards, one stops, or welfare agencies), to identify a list of possible focus group participants for each of the three groups (current, former and potential students). In most cases, the colleges generated the lists of current and former students, whereas public agency partners were relied upon to recruit students for the potential student group.[6]

Due to the difficulty[7] in recruiting study participants, multiple methods of recruitment were employed. The most common method was for the college or agency to send out a letter inviting the recipient to contact MDRC if interested in participating. Potential participants were provided with a toll-free number to call. If the initial mailing failed to generate enough of a response (or enough eligible callers), the research team worked with the sites to do follow-up mailings, and in some cases, sent out mailings to additional recipients who had not been contacted previously. In several sites, follow-up phone calls were also conducted by the college or the research team for people who had received letters.[8] When mailings or calls did not work, posters or flyers were used to recruit additional participants. Posters or flyers were left in community and college locations, including one stops and distributed at special classes or programs.

Potential participants were screened using the study's criteria. Possible participants were often screened out for not meeting one or more of the focus group criteria, such as wage level, employment or parental status, or in the case of former students, having completed a degree since leaving the community college. Eligible participants were also sometimes screened out for not being available on the scheduled date or time of the focus group.

As an incentive to participate in the study, participants received $50 cash or a $50 gift certificate to a merchant as incentives. Each participant received an additional $5 to cover transportation costs and refreshments were provided during the focus group session.

We suspect that it was difficult to recruit participants for several reasons. As previously stated, we had to reject many interested callers because they failed to meet our screening criteria. In many cases, potential participants may have moved without informing the colleges or public agencies who conducted mailings for us, and thus their contact information was incorrect. Although we offered incentives to participate, these may not have been compelling enough to interest potential participants in contacting us.

C. Focus Group Administration

The focus groups were conducted from March through July 2001. Each of the focus groups were led by members of the research team who were trained in conducting focus groups and who were familiar with the protocols. At each of the six community colleges, three focus groups were conducted (one at each site with current, former and potential students), for a total

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[6]One exception was in Warren, Michigan where both Macomb Community College and the local Macomb-St. Clair Workforce Development Board did mailings to recruit former students.

[7]In most sites, it was necessary to send out 350-800 letters to get enough eligible participants for each group.

[8]Follow up phone calls were done for LaGuardia, Cabrillo and Macomb.

of eighteen focus groups. Focus groups ranged in size from three to ten participants, with an average of seven participants. Current and potential student focus groups tended to be slightly larger on average than those with former students. A total of 131 individuals participated in the focus groups.

Each focus group was administered using a semi-structured protocol. Discussion topics included exploring how participants balance work, family and college[9]; how the local college, employers, government or community-based organizations, or family and friends support or impede that balancing act; the role of personal motivation in their decisions to attend or not to attend college; past education experiences; designing an ideal recruitment and retention package for low-wage working parents; personal and career goals; and personal reasons for educational decisions (to attend, leave, or decide not to go to college).

All but one focus group was conducted in English. The Cabrillo potential student focus group was conducted in Spanish. For that group, being fluent in Spanish was an additional screening criterion. Each focus group lasted between one and a half to two hours with audio recordings made of each group. The tapes from the groups were transcribed to facilitate content analysis.

D. Data Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study was each focus group, which was guided by a semi-structured protocol. The data from the focus groups were coded into 34 topics, using QSR*NUDIST, a computer package designed to aid users in handling non-numerical and unstructured data in qualitative analysis. The coding structure was generous and allowed the coding of discussion items into multiple topics as appropriate. We employed axial coding which requires the constant comparative method, including inter-rater reliability.

E. Additional Data Sources

In addition to the focus groups, two additional data collection instruments were used:

1. At the beginning of each focus group participants were asked to complete a short demographic survey. The purpose of the short demographic survey was to collect data on participant characteristics including level of educational attainment, marital status, age, gender, race/ethnicity, work history and employment status, and number and ages of children.

2. Focus group participants were asked to complete an individual, follow-up telephone interview four to six weeks after the original focus group. The purpose of the telephone interview was to collect individual data regarding topics such as economic well-being that participants may not wish to disclose in a focus group setting. The data reported in this paper were derived from the demographic survey and focus groups only. Data from the telephone interviews will be presented in the final report.

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[9]The potential students were asked how they would hypothetically balance all three, based on their experiences of balancing work and family alone, at present.

IV. Profiles of Study Participants

Table 1 provides demographic, select educational attainment, and economic characteristics of the 131 focus group participants, for the entire sample and for each of the three groups of participants (current, former and potential students). We realize that some differences between participants in the current, former and potential student groups are likely due in part to differences in the sources of recruitment for these groups. Since potential students were recruited most often from welfare agencies or one stops, it stands to reason that they were likely to have lower earnings, less stable employment situations, and higher public assistance receipt than current or former students, for example.

As the table indicates, the sample was predominately female, with only 19 males participating. The sample was racially and ethnically diverse, overall, although there were differences in the racial/ethnic makeup across the three groups of participants, with the current student group including a majority of white students, and the former and potential student groups including a majority black or Hispanic participants. Most of the sample was between the ages of 21 to 40, although the sample included some older participants (none were at or above retirement age, however).

Focus groups include a wide range of family types, although nearly half of the participants reported being single and never having married. Likewise, about a quarter of the full sample reported being currently married, and 20.6% of the full sample reported being divorced. There were slight differences across the three groups in terms of marital status. Many more current and former students were married as compared to potential students, and a slightly greater percentage of potential students reported being single as compared to the other two groups. A little over 28% of potential students reported being divorced, as compared to 16.0% and 17.1% of the current and former student groups, respectively. Nearly all participants reported being the primary caretakers of children. The majority of focus group participants reported having one or two children, although 12.2% of participants reported having between four to eight children. On average, former and potential students reported larger family sizes than current students.

Table 1

Selected Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Focus-Group Participants, by Group

Characteristic	Current Students	Former Students	Potential Students	Full Sample
Demographic Characteristics				
Gender (%)				
Female	86.0	85.7	84.8	85.5
Male	14.0	14.3	15.2	14.5
Age (%)				
21-30	38.0	31.4	32.6	34.4
31-40	34.0	34.3	37.0	35.1
41-50	12.0	17.1	13.0	13.7
Over 50	0.0	8.6	2.2	3.1
Missing	16.0	8.6	15.2	13.7
Average age (years)	32.3	35.4	33.0	33.4
Race/Ethnicity (%)				
White, non-Hispanic	44.0	37.1	23.9	35.1
Black, non-Hispanic	18.0	48.6	32.6	31.3
Hispanic	24.0	11.4	30.4	22.9
Other[a]	14.0	0.0	13.0	9.9
Family Status				
Marital Status (%)				
Single, never married	46.0	40.0	52.2	46.6
Married	30.0	34.3	13.0	25.2
Divorced/Separated	16.0	17.1	28.3	20.6
Not married, living with someone	6.0	0.0	6.5	4.6
Widowed	2.0	2.9	0.0	1.5
Missing	0.0	5.7	0.0	1.5
Primary Caretaker (%)	96.0	88.6	89.13	91.6
Number of Children (%)				
1	56.0	20.0	26.1	35.9
2	28.0	37.1	34.8	32.8
3	12.0	20.0	17.4	16.0
4	4.0	5.7	8.7	6.1
5-8	0.0	8.6	10.9	6.1
Missing	0.0	8.6	2.2	3.1
Average number of children	1.6	2.5	2.5	2.2
Age of youngest child (%)				
Under 1	2.0	5.7	2.2	3.1
1-5	58.0	42.9	56.5	53.4
6-12	41.0	31.4	30.4	31.3
13 and older	19.0	11.4	8.7	9.2
Missing	0.0	8.6	2.2	3.1

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Characteristic	Current Students	Former Students	Potential Students	Full Sample
Educational Attainment				
Earned high-school diploma or GED[b] (%)	98.0	94.3	50.0	80.2
Employment Status				
Currently employed (%)	92.0	58.7	68.6	74.1
Average number of hours worked per week[c]	26.0	37.5	35.2	32.2
Average number of months at job[c]	19.4	28.1	10.0	17.9
Employed in internship or work-study program[cd] (%)	22.0	2.9	n/a	9.2
Missing[d] (%)	4.0	5.7	n/a	3.1
Average weekly wage[c] ($)	246.30	407.12	281.10	298.91
Received Income from Financial Aid Sources in the Past Year[d] (%)				
Pell or other educational grants	82.0	25.7	n/a	38.2
Missing	4.0	11.4	n/a	4.6
Education loans	40.0	2.9	n/a	16.0
Missing	10.0	8.6	n/a	6.1
Scholarships	16.0	0.0	n/a	6.1
Missing	12.0	8.6	n/a	6.9
Received Income from Non-Work, Non-Financial Aid Sources in the Past Year (%)				
TANF or other cash welfare	24.0	31.4	50.0	35.1
Missing	10.0	5.7	13.0	9.9
Food Stamps	38.0	40.0	78.3	52.7
Missing	8.0	8.6	2.2	6.1
Child Support	26.0	20.0	17.4	21.4
Missing	10.0	8.6	13.0	10.7
Sample size	50	35	46	131

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from written surveys administered at the focus group meetings.

NOTES: Nonresponses for the items in which the nonresponse rate for all specific characteristics was 5 percent or higher across the three groups are shown as "missings". The nonresponses for all other items were excluded from the calculations.

For the California group of potential students, the survey was administered in Spanish. These survey responses were translated from Spanish into English for the purposes of analysis.

[a]This category includes respondents who identified themselves as being Asian, Native American or another racial/ethnic group.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

NOTES: [b]In the survey, participants were asked first if they had a high-school diploma and then if they had a GED. Since some participants responded "yes" to each question, the responses to both questions were combined.

[c]Unemployed participants were asked to refer to their last job when answering these questions.

[d]Responses from potential students were excluded from these calculations because this group of participants is defined as individuals who have never enrolled in college.

A majority of participants reported being currently employed, including almost all of the current students, while far fewer former and potential students were working at the time of the focus groups.[10] Current students reported working fewer hours on average as compared to former or potential students. Among our current students, 22.0% reported employment in college internships or work-study programs.[11] On average, participants reported being employed with their current or most recent job (if unemployed) for almost 1.5 years. Former students reported having been employed at their most recent or current job for more than 2 years, on average, as compared to 19.4 months for current students and only 10 months for potential students. On average, participants reported earning nearly $300 per week (which is roughly equivalent to $8.50/hr for a 35-hour work week), although former students reported much higher wages on average than current or potential students.[12]

Participants reported a wide range of sources of income or educational assistance, other than work income. Food Stamps was a source of supplemental income for more than half of all recipients, and 78.3% of potential students as compared to only 38.0% and 40.0% of current and former students, respectively. TANF was an additional support for many focus group participants, although a much larger percentage of potential students reported receiving TANF than former or current students. Child support was the third most important source of non-work income other than educational assistance for the entire sample, and an especially important source for nearly a third of the current students. Among current students, most reported receiving Pell or other educational grants in the past year, while only 40.0% reported receiving education loans.[13]

In terms of educational attainment, most participants in the current and former student groups reported either having a high school diploma or GED, as compared to only half of the potential students. Other educational information not reported in Table 1 includes statistics on progress towards degree completion and educational goals. Ninety percent of current students

[10]We did not distinguish between full-time, part-time or less than part-time employment - participants reported working between 4 to 65 hours per week, on average.

[11]This number does not include additional current, former or even potential students who may be full or part-time employees of the colleges.

[12]This may be due in part to screening criteria for the focus groups, in which former students were screened for their wages at the last time they were enrolled in college, and not for their current wages. It was therefore possible for a former student to have been earning low wages while they were in college, but currently earn much higher wages than those we considered "low" for the purposes of the study.

[13]Former students may have received educational assistance before withdrawing from college, and along with some of the potential students, they may have received some sort of assistance for other education or training.

and 88.6% of former students reported having earned credits towards a degree, thus far, and 92% of current students reported being enrolled in school at the time of the focus groups. 74.0% of current students reported completing half or more of their programs. In terms of educational credential goals, 74.0% of current students reported working towards an associate's degree, 18.0% reported working towards a certificate, and 16.0% reported working towards a bachelor's degree.

V. Topics Raised by Focus Group Participants

Group discussions raised a number of additional personal issues that impacted participants' perceptions of pursuing (or completing) postsecondary education. As a group, the current students reported fewer personal barriers, significant support from family, and more stability in terms of income and housing. Former students reported a mixed set of supports and stability, that was influenced by periodic ebbs and flows. Overall, potential students reported many on-going barriers, few family supports and lives in a constant state of flux, regarding factors such as income, employment, and housing. Some of the personal factors we examined, include:

Balancing the demands of life: A clear theme that emerged across all of the focus groups was the on-going challenge to balance the demands of life, which included work, family, school, and dealing with recurring crises such as pending eviction, extended family members' health or other personal issues, and financial concerns. Clearly, for current students as well as former or potential students, college would be only one responsibility in the midst of already very busy schedules. Participants were in many cases working or seeking employment, and parents, as well. They described how difficult juggling all their responsibilities were. One former student recalled an average day for her when she was combining work and college:

> Really, you all, what I'll be doing is sometimes I'll be crying, oh this is so hard. I got two kids, one is eight and I got another one that can't go to child care until 8:00. So, I'm pushing to get to work. Luckily I got a lenient boss, gives me 30 minutes, you know, to get to work due to the fact of my schedule. And I was going to work and going to school. Working and going to school is real hard. I was working from 7 to like 3. My lunch hour was my class. So, that was one class. I had like three classes for the week…My other two classes were like an hour, and one was like an hour and a half, another was like 45 minutes. That was after work. Then I had to rush to get the kids from day care, which I was going late because my class would go over my day care time. Well, finally I had no day care, no baby-sitter, nobody to go pick the kids up from day care. I had to leave class early to pick up my kids on time. And that hurt me because they started feeling a little lonely because I would be going all day, didn't see the kids. Get in the house, got to wash them and give them something to eat if they haven't already eaten at the day care, get them in bed. By the time they get into bed it's sometimes 10, 10:30, close to 11:00.

Child care: The issue of child care received considerable discussion in all eighteen focus groups and across all three groups of low-wage workers. For those participants who had stable child care arrangements, child care was viewed as an integral support for their ability to either attend college, or as a way to allow them to consider attending college in the future. For participants who lacked stable child care arrangements, child care was a source of concern. Participants talked about several dimensions of child care, including cost, access, and quality. It was an issue for parents of both infants or young children as well as school-aged children or teens. One former student with older children explained:

> They are supposed to be grown and able to do things on their own and I really have a problem with that because this is the age where the sex starts, this is the age where the drugs start. This is the age where they go out there robbing and stealing and everything else. This is the age where they really need somebody to protect them, to guide them, to lead them.

Although four of the six colleges in the study did offer some form of child care on campus, in many cases, the participants noted long waiting lists; limited capacity; and lack of child care during late evening or weekend classes.

Participants' views on child care were not limited to availability, convenience, quality and cost. Many participants expressed a desire to personally spend more time with their children and viewed their parenting role as vitally important. To this end, many participants expressed the need to sacrifice or postpone their personal educational goals, in order to foster or maintain personal involvement in their children's lives. One potential student commented:

> And you don't even spend time with your kids. That is the biggest thing. I don't want to work all day and then go to school at night or work all night and go to school all day and then there's my kids, like who are you?

Discrimination: The issue of discrimination received moderate discussion in all eighteen focus groups. Participants experienced discrimination due to gender, race/ethnicity, age, pregnancy and parenting status. Participants experienced discrimination in multiple settings including community colleges, employers, landlords and government organizations. A potential student commented on discrimination she experienced at her job:

> [My employer] did a thing called shift bid. So, I was trying to get off midnights... The day before a shift bid, I was talking to one of the managers and she had asked me about my daughter and I showed her a picture and she went, "Oh, her father must be black." It was just the way she said it that you could just tell. Shift bids came out the next day and I'll be damned if I wasn't stuck on midnights. You could just tell that she was just so appalled with the idea...

Another potential student described discrimination at another postsecondary institution because she was a parent:

> I would have already been to school if they didn't discriminate against me because I had a child. I had a full scholarship. You know... they offered a nursing program when I was about 19 years old and we had to take a test and the highest score gets the financial aid. I scored and I got in and when they found out I had a child, they turned me down because I had a child. They felt that I wouldn't be a good risk even though I had all the grades to back it up and the intelligence that they wanted, but because I had to play parent at home, they thought I couldn't give enough of my time to get through the school.

Some participants, who had experienced multiple instances of employment discrimination, expressed doubt as to whether increased education could trump discriminatory practices. A potential student reflected:

> I have been faced with it so many times. I have trained girls, white girls that come in. I have trained them and they have given them the position over me. I mean, that has been happening to me since I was about 18.

Domestic violence: Previous or on-going issues regarding domestic violence were raised in one third of the focus groups. These issues were more often raised, and more extensively discussed among the potential student group. Three key sub-themes that emerged were: 1) the graphic nature of the physical abuse the victims incurred; 2) the lack of support from law enforcement agencies; and 3) the lenient sentences imposed by the legal system.

When asked whether it would have been possible to attend college while living with an abusive partner, participants in one focus group of potential students explained that it would not have been possible, due to the severity of the abuse. One participant described her experience:

> [I was] choked with a belt while he made me watch in the mirror until I was unconscious, dragged up and down 14 mile asphalt this big and then thrown in boiling hot showers. Nothing would have been possible.

Participants from other focus groups also expressed lack of support from law enforcement agencies in addressing issues of domestic violence:

> I walked out to my car and he pulled me out [of] the window. And the police officer had the nerve to ask me while I'm in the gurney getting into the ambulance was I screaming at him or something to provoke him.

> I was three months pregnant and I ended up with two broken ribs, two black eyes and a dislocated jaw. He got released 28 days later even though it was a felony.

For focus group participants who were on-going or recent victims of domestic violence, the thought of pursuing postsecondary education at a community college was overshadowed by immediate needs of safety and survival. These participants clearly expressed that domestic violence is a substantial barrier to attending or completing studies at a community college.

Housing and transportation: Access to stable and affordable housing was raised by participants, particularly in the Santa Cruz, CA area where housing costs are among the highest in the nation. Participants with good housing raised that as a critical support which enabled them to attend college or consider college as a possibility. Likewise, access to public or private transportation was a factor for participants, in terms of their ability to attend college classes or reach multiple destinations outside of their homes on a given day, including their workplace, child care center, or other location.

Motivation: Most participants favored postsecondary education, especially for their children if not for themselves. Some participants believed there was concrete social or economic value in the degree itself, while others saw college as a means to pick up job-related skills that would lead to career advancement. When asked if the degree or certificate itself matters or whether the skills/individual classes are all that matters, one participant explained, "The knowledge is nice, the experience is nice, but the piece of paper is what's going to buy your house because it's going to get you your job, that's going to be more money...." Others felt the skills/job they would get from college were more important than completing a program or getting the degree itself. One current student explained that even though graduation was approaching, it was tempting to think about dropping out now, since potential employers wouldn't care about the credential itself, only certain courses:

> And when we graduate, the average coming out of our — for an average student coming out of our program after two years is to start between 45 and 50 grand a year. I could quit right now and start at, at least 40 or 45 grand a year, without my one last term. And let me tell you that's tempting.... I could drop out now, I could start making money because in that field you don't necessarily have to have a degree.

In this particular case, the rest of the group disagreed, saying that the degree itself did matter in the labor market and elsewhere.

Participants often acknowledged that their own motivation to go to college was a major factor in their education decisions over their lifetimes. One former student explained:

> I want to be honest and say that probably the biggest factor that has stopped me from continuing to go to school is me. I haven't made it a high enough priority or I have done things in my life that have stopped me from being able to go.

Family relationships: The impact of family support or the lack thereof was a clear theme in all eighteen focus groups. Participants talked about a variety of family relationships, with parents, children and spouses or partners. For some participants, supportive family members were considered a major asset, and enabled them to attend college. These family members provided services, such as child care, financial assistance, or emotional support. Other participants described family relationships that were a source of stress, including spouses, partners or children that resented their spending time at college or on homework. Others described relationships that directly hindered their ability to attend college. Participants often

talked about going to college or wanting to attend in terms of the positive benefits postsecondary education might have for their children.

For participants who had family support, it often made the difference in terms of their ability to attend college, given how difficult it was for them to balance all their various competing demands for their time, alone. One former student who was planning on returning to college the next semester explained that when she had last been enrolled, her family was a major asset in enabling her to attend college:

> My grandfather was the only person in my family who had been to college besides me, so my whole family was like, "yeah", they was happy and especially my mom. She's like every time I get a report card, she would want to see it, she frames it, she puts it on the wall.

Many participants, particularly former or potential students, felt they lacked family support. As one former student explained, his family was supportive until he actually asked for their help. A current student explained that while her husband thought he was supportive, his expectations for the amount of time required by college were unrealistic, and he was resentful as a result:

> When he said, ok, you can do it [go to college], but when he said you could go to school, I think he said in his mind, oh, she is going to go to school. Then she is going to come home and do home stuff — not homework...That was hard at first to get him to understand I need time to do my work, not just home work — that was hard.... I think that was the hardest thing, getting him to understand that it was not just going to school and coming back home — I had other stuff to do.

Peer relationships: Other students or friends outside of college were another source of support for many participants. Some current students came in pairs of friends to the focus groups, and clearly depended on each other for peer support in terms of class work, child care arrangements, tutoring, or finding out college-related information. Participants also talked about their friends' experiences with college, financial aid, or other related institutions.

Physical health, mental health, and substance abuse of self or other: Current and former students talked about health problems for themselves or family members which interfered with attending college, and in some cases led to their dropping or stopping out of college. Several participants mentioned mental health issues for themselves or family members interfering with postsecondary plans or daily functioning, such as depression, agoraphobia, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Another participant described how caring for a parent with a history of substance abuse and alcoholism was a barrier to attending college.

Money or income (including financial aid, or other sources of income): Many of the participants' concerns regarding the financial implications of attending community college were not centered on the added costs of attending college (tuition, books), but rather the loss of income they would incur if they reduced their current level of employment. Many former and potential

students did not see college as a viable option given their need to work full-time. They did not believe they could combine part-time school with full-time work, and they did not believe they could afford to reduce their work hours. For those participants who had applied for and received financial aid, financial aid itself was usually described as an invaluable support. Other participants had been unable to qualify for financial aid, which was a financial burden for them. Still others, especially in the potential student group, had little knowledge about financial aid opportunities available to them. Some current and former students had positive experiences with student loans, while others across all three groups were concerned about taking on any debts, even to pay for college.

Academic skill level and language: Some participants reported having difficulty with particular academic subjects such as mathematics or writing. For some former students, remedial requirements had been an obstacle to completing their programs. The English language was an obstacle to some foreign-born potential students, especially those in the focus group conducted in Spanish. Those participants reported having low literacy in Spanish which made attending college and learning English difficult for them.

VI. Institutional and Personal Supports and Barriers for Low-Wage Working Students

We also examined the supports and barriers across various institutional contexts, including the community college (for current and former students), employers, government agencies and community-based organizations.

A. College

Focus group discussions centered on ways in which community colleges had been helpful or could stand to improve for current and former students. Discussions with potential students were necessarily more hypothetical, and focused on what potential students believed colleges would have to offer them as well as what they believed they would need if they decided to attend. Prior to our discussion about the participants' specific experiences with community college, we asked participants about their general impression of college. As a group, current students highly valued education and were more knowledgeable about general college programs and supports. Former students valued education, but place a higher value on employment, noting the need to improve their financial condition prior to completing their education. Among potential students, education was not as valued and the participants did not have a clear understanding of college services, programs or expectations.

Some of the key topic areas that emerged from the discussions include the presence of special targeted services or programs for certain groups of students, guidance counseling and academic advising, and financial aid.

Support services and special programs: Those current or former students who were aware of special programs or services available at their college were generally pleased with them and considered them a major support while they were in college. Participants described special

programs targeting low-income students, women, adult and re-entry students, displaced homemakers, welfare recipients, and other groups. Through these programs, students received such services as case management, financial assistance, and help navigating other college services such as financial aid, tutoring, and peer support. One current student described several special college programs that had helped him. He explained that two of the programs work well together, and that "...they really help us keep going. If you get to that middle hump, you know, you start getting bogged down and that sort of thing." Later, he added that staff in the college's special programs were a support in and of themselves. He said that they have "...been a tremendous boost to me personally, in confidence. Yes, you can do it, and yes, you can do whatever you want to, and yes, you can do something that is going to be sufficient to get your children, your family off of Welfare and stay off Welfare forever."

Unfortunately, many current and former students were not aware of these special programs or services. Participants often learned about special programs or services during the focus groups themselves, or by word of mouth from friends or family members. Potential students had even less information about any of the services available at their local colleges, although some were aware of certain services, such as financial aid. Former students at one college explained that information about programs and services was something that one had to actively seek out. The facilitator asked whether information about services at the college was easy to obtain or hard to find. Participants responded that "once you found it, it was pretty easy," that they had to first find the information on their own, and that they had to "be agressive, you got to ask somebody."

Counseling and academic advising: Many participants wanted some counseling or advising as to selecting and scheduling appropriate courses. Some felt they had received good or sufficient advising. One current student described the counseling services at her college:

> That's kind of where you go if you want to find out about programs specifically — you start there and then they ship you out to the program and then you talk to people there.... Ask you where you're at, and ...when you're going to graduate and they compile everything they tell you that you going to need. That helps.

Other students, particularly former students, felt that they had not received enough counseling. One participant explained that while counselors did try to prevent her from dropping out, they did not reach her in time. She explained:

> ...I feel the college should have, by the time I was in my second semester; they should have stepped in and counseled me. They should have been obligated to have counseled a new student. I was only 25. I was a high school graduate and I hadn't had any college experience or knowledge and I wasn't prepared for what the college had in store for me as far as the courses, the time, you know, all of those things that factor into, you know, being successful in completing the class. I didn't have a clue. And I felt that the college should have at that point stepped in, at least by the second semester. I did have good grades but they could have been better. As a

> matter of fact, the fourth semester that I went, there was a requirement that I have gotten counseling because I went to speak with someone and they looked it over and said hey, they should counsel you. You can't take another class without someone talking to you about what you're going to take and how you're taking it.

Once she actually received counseling, the participant found it to be helpful, although it was "too late." She said:

> That was once I was in trouble. I was threatened to lose one of my credits, so I had to withdraw and then I was on financial aid. I was also going to maybe lose the opportunity to get financial aid, so the next semester I went to the counselor. The one particular administrator that I went to was very, very helpful.... I didn't get a chance to experience the actual counseling and them telling me what you should do. You know, I never got a chance to experience that because I didn't go back. I didn't feel comfortable at that point. It was too late. You know, I was trying hard, I was doing everything I could. I felt worse than I did coming in and I was just discouraged. And you know, to go and have someone to counsel me at this point and say well, you need to do this, it wasn't even an interest to me at that point.

Another participant had left college more than a decade before, without knowing that she already had enough credits for a general education associate's degree:

> At the time when I stopped, I was pregnant and it was not too long after the semester had started and I was real sick, so I stopped going and, of course, then I had the baby and staying home with him, then working. Come to find out, I had enough credits to get my associate's even at that point in time and just didn't know I could get one at that time. It wasn't until '99 when I started checking into going back to school again and I met with a counselor and she was like, you have already got enough credits for your general studies. I said, 'I'll just take that.' It is not going to make any difference working towards a bachelor's. If I had known that years ago, I would have already had the associate's and that might have pushed me to go back.

Financial aid: Federal financial aid (including Pell Grants and student loans) and state or private grants and scholarships were another resource that was greatly appreciated by those current and former students who had received them. One former student, who planned on returning soon to finish her degree, explained that she could only do so with financial aid:

> ...I know if I wasn't getting financial aid, I know for a fact I wouldn't be going to school. There would be no way. If I wasn't getting financial aid, I would just be like, you know, working, not going to school. So if it wasn't being paid for, I wouldn't be going.

A common theme from the focus groups, however, was that many participants were not eligible for federal financial aid. Often, they believed it was because they were married, and that they made too much money to qualify. One current student explained that not getting financial aid was the biggest barrier to continuing her education as she started a bachelor's degree program in the fall:

> The worse thing is going to be, come fall, when I have to start paying the higher tuition. Being that I am married, I don't fall into any type of qualifications for any type of aid. It goes by your income, not by your bills. So, I haven't figured quite how I am going to do it yet other than going into debt.

Another frequent issue was losing financial aid due to academic performance or missed classes or tests due to a personal crisis (or often, a combination of the two). One current student worried that he and his partner might lose their financial aid if his grades fell during the semester due to his math class. He said:

> ...The financial aid department is threatening us that if we don't pass both our classes, we will be kicked off of financial aid. There is no leeway nowadays so I don't know what is going to happen there. I admit I have never missed a class and if by chance I don't pass a class it is just because I couldn't. I am going to fight that tooth and nail....

Participants described situations where they had been hospitalized for cancer or lost child care arrangements and had to return to full-time work after a spouse lost a job, and were not able to complete courses as a result. They were placed on academic probation, and until they met the college's requirements to be removed from probation, they couldn't receive financial aid. One former student who remained on probation felt that personal crisis situations for adult students weren't taken into account by college administrators or the financial aid system:

> The thing that amazes me about the school is a community college, being a community college, you have to realize, like you said, not everyone is 18, fresh out of school and still living with mom and dad. There are situations that happen on a daily basis just as it happens to all the administrators in the school. It happens to the people who go here as well, and there are gray areas. Like it or not, you deal with human beings, you deal in gray areas. Not everything is black and white....They treat you as if you are 18 years old out of school and you just decided you don't want to do it that day.

Some former students owed money on Pell Grants that they had received because they dropped out before completing the semester. They saw the amount owed on the original grant as an obstacle to returning to college. One former student explained:

> Just recently, well last semester I took some classes and I had to drop out because of child care arrangements. And the frustrating part was yes, I was on a Pell Grant and I had to call my professors and take incompletes

> because I wasn't able to finish the courses. I was doing good but I wasn't able to complete them, and so I had to drop out. And I called the financial aid and they were aware of the situation. And in the meantime, I lost my credits because I had to drop out. And then they turn around and tell me I had to pay the $580 back for the Pell Grant, which the government already paid. And then they got the $580 back, then I had to pay them for the classes. And now I have to wait another semester to come up with the money to take six credits in order to go back again. And I qualify for a Pell Grant. And I'm like why can't you just wipe this clean? You already know what's going, what was my situation. And so, they mailed me a form that said I could write a letter to bring it up in a hearing. But I was like you already know my situation. Why should I have to go through this format, you know? I mean I think it's a joke there.

Potential participants often gave the need for income to supplement that lost to reduced work hours should they decide to attend college as a major barrier. Many felt that they could not add college to their full-time work day, but could not afford to work less than full-time to support their families. As one participant explained, "Well, no, it is better that I work because if I also go to school there will not be enough money..." The final report from the project will detail these and other financial aid themes in depth, as many focus group participants suggested that financial assistance was critical to their decision to attend college.

B. Employers

Overall, current students viewed employment as important but it needed to be structured to facilitate college. Job opportunities that interfered with their educational agenda were not considered as viable options. Former students viewed employment as essential, clearly stating their need for on-going financial stability. If a choice were necessary between education and employment, employment would be selected. Among the potential students, employment was also important, but the participants had less job stability and career direction.

Conflicts with school schedule: Participants described mixed experiences with their employers and how flexible they were in terms of allowing them to combine work with school. Many current students had found employment that would be flexible to support going to college, even quitting jobs that interfered with employment, or switching positions within their companies. These students really put college ahead of working, whereas many former and potential students put employment ahead of their postsecondary plans. Even among current students, some placed more of a premium on having a flexible employer than others. In this exchange from one of the focus groups, the facilitator asked current students about their need for flexibility from an employer to accommodate their college schedules. One participant felt that college had to fit within her schedule, while another left another job to obtain one at the college, to concentrate more on her studies:

> FACILITATOR: So, you were out looking for a job? Was it very important to you to find a job that was flexible for school. Did you turn down jobs that didn't seem so flexible?

> PARTICIPANT: Well, it wasn't that much of a flexible — it was more like, I need a job. School had to be flexible instead of the job being flexible, and I was lucky enough to find something that was flexible.

> PARTICIPANT: I ended up leaving a job to go to [college job] because it was really hard. They were not flexible, but she couldn't be flexible because she had to have people there when she needed them there. I said I had to leave there because I could not study — on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday — one of those days that we were representing like a store or... for an application. You had to be there — there was like no question — if you said you were going to be there that week then you had to be there. No "but's" — if you had a test you had to be there so, I had to leave that job.

In general, participants that worked for their community colleges found lots of flexibility and more of an understanding of their responsibilities as students, than did other participants who worked for other employers. However, one potential student took a job at a local college in order to gain access to financial assistance for college, but was disappointed to find out she had to work there another year before she could qualify for tuition reimbursement. Likewise, there were instances among former students where even though they worked for their local community college, they had been unable to return, due to other factors in their lives, to complete their degree or certificate programs.

Tuition reimbursement: Many participants believed that their employers offered tuition reimbursement programs. Some who took advantage of these programs considered them extremely helpful. One participant explained that he received nearly free tuition so long as he maintained good grades in his coursework:

> But it's a nice deal. I mean I don't get my... books or anything like that, but it's a nice deal to have. It encourages you to like, work hard and get, you know, good grades, you know. And then when you do, you know, you get a reward for it. So I think that's kind of nice.

Others were wary of participating in reimbursement programs. In some cases, they did not believe that their coursework would qualify, where employers would only reimburse for "job related" classes. Others did not want to commit to formal or informal agreements to remain with that employer for a certain number of years after graduating; they were seeking postsecondary credentials in order to find employment with another company or in another industry altogether. One current student explained why she wouldn't sign up for her employer's tuition reimbursement program:

> They require you to sign a contract stating that if you quit within less than three years after they have given you a check, you have to pay that money back to them. I don't plan on staying there that long, so I am not taking any money from them.

Other participants worked for employers that did not offer any tuition reimbursement options, or were not aware of any options if they did exist.

C. Government Agencies and Community-Based Organizations

The focus groups also explored the degree to which participants had relied on support services or financial assistance from government agencies, such as welfare or workforce development, or from community-based organizations to go to college; for potential participants, focus groups explored whether they had sought assistance to go to college from these agencies or organizations. Some participants reported having received financial assistance and other supports from welfare, workforce development, or other government programs (especially WIC and Food Stamps), which had proved helpful to them while attending college. A current student explained how welfare and workforce development agency staff were critical supports while she was enrolled in college:

> My caseworker has been great — she has been my support system. She has helped me — if you get AFDC — have to go through the one stop. Also my one stop counselor has been great — never had a problem. Always try to bend some rules for me. Do this and we'll help you if you do that, and they help me out.

Most participants reported negative experiences, however, with welfare and workforce development programs, with regard to getting assistance from government agencies to attend college programs. They felt these programs were not geared for working low-income families, but instead favored the unemployed. Some potential participants believed that there was a catch-22 when it came to seeking education and training assistance through the welfare or workforce development systems. They explained that when they applied for assistance, they received information about education and training options, but they first had to go through the job search process. If they found work, which they did since they had years of work experience, they were no longer eligible for education and training assistance, in some states. One participant explained that she would have had to purposely act inappropriately during her job interviews to qualify for education and training assistance from her local one stop:

> I feel like we're being punished because we actually went and did what was better for our family, work — because the help that they provide you... I feel like if you just live off of somebody else and just do the community service and never want to do anything and mess up on your interviews, then they pay for your college because that's what my sister did. She would go in jeans to her interviews.

Participants talked about community-based organizations to a lesser extent, although some mentioned local churches that had been supportive to them or would assist them if they decided to attend college in the future.

VII. Overcoming the Barriers and Maximizing the Supports: Participants' Perspectives on Recruitment and Retention

Although many students reported multiple and complex barriers to attending or completing college, including issues such as domestic violence, discrimination, or lack of family support, the students also expressed definite ideas about how colleges could recruit and retain low-wage working students. Many of their suggestions were in the areas of child care; financial and employment incentives; and college supports.

Child care was the single most identified factor that influenced a participant's ability to access or complete postsecondary education. Participants expressed a clear desire to have high quality and affordable child care at or near the community college. Participants also needed child care during evening and/or weekend hours when they were most likely to take classes or study. Participants expressed a need for activities for older children, who need guidance, direction and adult investment during the middle-school and teenage years. (See earlier discussion of child care topics for examples of these concerns.)

Financial and employment incentives were the second most expressed need. Participants expressed the desire to pursue and complete postsecondary education if employment opportunities were guaranteed. Similarly, participants expressed a need for resources designed to provide financial support to offset the loss of income associated with reduced employment when education is pursued:

> [It] would be best if they'd have to give me some guarantees in black and white…because I can go to school for four years, get that degree. Who's going to give me jobs? I know people personally that have did that and they don't have a job.
>
> I think hard-working parents want to go back to school, but the burden is the money and the time....

Participants clearly articulated a need for academic advisement, career counseling, and an accessible (and interested) personal advisor throughout each phase of their interactions with the community college:

> You need an advisor that can relate to you on an individual basis. Everybody's situation is different. There is more people like us with kids that work that are trying to get into school than your fresh 18 year old who has a scholarship or mommy and daddy are going to pay for it. There is a lot more working single mothers like us that want to pursue our educations and better ourselves for ourselves and our children and the options aren't there.

VIII. Implementing Solutions and Conclusions

Based on data from the Opening Doors study, we have identified potential program models and ideas for future research that could address the issues raised in this study and increase community college access and retention for low-wage workers. These models and program strategies would likely address multiple barriers, and involve enhancements to existing community college programs. They include student support centers; short-term certification programs; supported distance learning; on-campus child care; financial aid for working adults; and enforcement of non-discrimination in higher education.

Student support centers: To address the need for greater counseling and busy schedules of low-wage working students, one demonstration idea involves creating "one-stop" support service centers on college campuses, by creating new services or improving existing support structures on college campuses. Colleges could work in concert with local welfare and workforce development agencies, to address student academic, personal, financial, employment, counseling, and child care needs. Such a program could be modeled on the Fast Track to Work program at Cabrillo College and similar programs at other colleges (e.g. AIM at Valencia, Student Resource Specialist pilot at Portland, and Access to Better Jobs at Sinclair). Such centralized supports would assist students enrolled in existing degree and certificate programs with additional one-on-one help in navigating the college system, finding help for personal problems, and in dealing with external agencies. The program could target low-wage workers directly or indirectly by targeting other student groups that may overlap, such as parents, first generation students, women or minorities, low-income students, re-entry students, and TANF or WIA recipients.

Short-term certification programs: Many focus group participants did not believe they could reduce work hours for a long period of time due to lost wages. Intensive, short-term education or training options may be more attractive for them. These demonstrations could include certification programs with employers or trade associations in high growth industries that use flexible modularized classes, the integration of basic academic and technical skills, and the opportunity to earn credit toward an AA degree, or beyond. Michigan and Oregon have examples of colleges doing this. These training programs could be offered along with support services that could be delivered through community-based providers — local public or private organizations — in order to offer support services that are beyond the college's resources to provide.

Supported distance learning: To allow working parents more flexibility in when they attend classes and reduce transportation barriers, colleges could offer targeted distance learning programs for certain degree areas. Some participants across all three groups expressed interest in distance learning approaches, although others clearly preferred traditional face-to-face interaction. Ideally, distance learning approaches would be combined with some on-campus classwork, to create cohorts among students, and a great deal of remote and in-person support to participants. Shoreline Community College in the Seattle area of Washington State is piloting a potential model for this approach.

On-campus child care: Participants in the focus groups clearly articulated that increasing the availability of quality child care (including infant care and teen enrichment programs) on college campuses, especially during the evening and weekends when many

working students go to class is another approach. Not having consistent child care was one reason many former students gave for having dropped or stopped out previously. Participants also expressed interest in flexible, drop-in programs where they could take their children in and out of the child care center as their class and work schedules demanded. Again, colleges could partner with local community-based providers to expand their current child care offerings, or offer child care at a nearby location.

Financial aid for working adults: Given that many participants across all three groups reported not being eligible for federal financial aid because they exceeded income guidelines or owed monies on previous federal grants or loans, another demonstration idea is to test new financial aid models targeted at low-wage workers. Working with state governments and other public or private partners, colleges could experiment with offering new forms of tuition assistance and financial incentives for adult working students, including the use of training stipends to compensate for reduced work hours and cover some living expenses, in addition to tuition.

Enforcement of non-discrimination in higher education: Some participants across all three groups encountered discrimination from faculty and/or advisors based on age, gender, race, pregnancy or marital status. Community college administrators and faculty could experiment with providing on-going diversity training for administrators and faculty, and identifying practices and language that are not acceptable or that do not foster a welcoming environment. For example, community colleges that offer welding training to all students, but exclusively stocking safety supplies such as goggles or gloves in large sizes may be sending unwelcoming messages to female students.

Although these suggestions focus on providing solutions via community colleges, promoting access to community college and fostering program completion will clearly involve other institutions, given the broad range of barriers the participants face. Addressing issues such as labor market discrimination and domestic violence that significantly reduce the opportunity for individuals to succeed, need to be appropriately addressed by other public sector organizations before recruitment and retention goals can be achieved. The task of recruiting, enrolling and retaining low-wage workers will necessarily extend beyond the walls of community colleges.

Taken together, these are potential ideas for improving the accessibility of higher education for low-wage working parents. MDRC plans to explore these ideas and others generated by the study with colleges and their public and private partners in the coming months. It is clear that low-wage working parents face many challenges as they attempt to improve the overall well-being of themselves and their families. Approaches to enhance the recruitment and retention of low-wage workers may be aided by the solutions identified by the Opening Doors focus group participants.

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